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Negotiating access in ethnographic research with 'hard to reach' young people: Establishing common ground or a process of methodological grooming?

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Andrew Bengry-Howell is currently a Research Fellow at the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods at the University of Southampton. His broad research interests are in youth identity and youth cultural practices, and qualitative methodologies. His work is interdisciplinary and cuts across the Social Sciences, but has particular resonance with the fields of Critical Social Psychology, Criminology, Sociology and Cultural Studies. He is currently working on a research project on methodological innovation in qualitative research within the Social Sciences, which is part of a programme of research on methodological innovation being undertaken by the National Centre for Research Methods. His previous research has investigated young people's consumption of commercial music festivals and underground 'free parties' (illegal raves); the relationship between alcohol marketing and the meanings that young people associate with alcohol consumption; and the cultural meaning of the motorcar to working class young men who modify and customise them. He has published in the *Journal of Youth Studies*, *Sociology* and *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*. Alongside his academic career, he has also worked for over 15 years for various local authorities as a youth worker and a youth consultant.

Professor Christine Griffin

Christine Griffin is Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Bath. Much of her recent work explores the relationship between identities and consumption for young people, with a long-standing interest in young women's lives. Recent projects include a study of young people's experiences of 'branded' leisure at music festivals and free parties with Andrew Bengry-Howell; a project on clubbing and dance cultures as forms of social and political participation with Sarah Riley; and a major study on the role of branding and marketing of drinks in relation to young adults' everyday drinking practices as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's Programme on 'Identities and Social Action'. She has published widely in journals including *Feminism and Psychology*, *Discourse Studies*, the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *Sociology* and the *Journal of Youth Studies*. Monographs include *Standpoints and Differences: Essays in Practice of Feminist Psychology* (with Karen Henwood and Ann Phoenix, Sage, 1998); *Typical Girls? Young Women from School to the Job Market* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985); and *Representations of Youth* (Polity Press, 1993).

Negotiating access in ethnographic research with ‘hard to reach’ young people: Establishing common ground or a process of methodological grooming?

Abstract

Negotiating access to participants poses challenges for all social research, but this can be particularly exacting in ethnographic projects which require participants to consent to prolonged research encounters that can be invasive or disruptive of their social lives. The process is more difficult still when accessing social groups that are already heavily scrutinised, and associated with practices that are viewed as socially problematic. In such cases, traditional forms of voluntary participation and/or informed consent may be difficult to obtain in advance. This paper addresses recent debates about the ethical dilemmas and challenges involved in social science research, drawing on the first author's experiences in three studies involving young people in the 18 to 25 age group. These projects focused on car modifiers (aka ‘boy racers’), young people's drinking cultures and Free Parties, and potential participants were initially reluctant to get involved in all three studies. In this paper we use these examples to explore the possibility that researchers might engage in forms of ‘methodological grooming’ to recruit participants, in an attempt to comply with traditional notions of informed consent. We end by advocating a more flexible approach to research ethics in such cases, based on gaining the trust of potential participants, finding common ground between researchers and participants, and negotiating conditional access and bounded consent.

Negotiating access in ethnographic research with ‘hard to reach’ young people: Establishing common ground or a process of methodological grooming?

Informed consent and negotiating the recruitment process

Obtaining informed consent, which is one of the cornerstones of ethical research practice, can be fraught with difficulty, and negotiating the involvement of research participants is one of the most important stages of the research process. In qualitative research that attempts to study groups and individuals who are classed as ‘hard-to-reach’, recruiting participants can pose particular challenges. Recruiting an appropriate sample of research participants can be even more exacting when those who are identified as potential participants are reluctant to engage with research, or resist researchers’ attempts to recruit them.

In the editorial for a recent special issue of the journal *Social Science and Medicine* on informed consent, Mary Boulton and Michael Parker (2007) reviewed debates on research ethics in health, clinical and bio-medical research as well as the overlapping field of social science. Boulton and Parker highlighted the emergence of new notions of consent and ethical research practice since the development of the Nuremberg code in 1946 and the Declaration of Helsinki drawn up by the World Medical Association in 1964. In late modern societies, standards of ethical research practice have shifted from a focus on protecting participants from harm towards increasing standardisation and regulation of research (Miller and Boulton, 2007). Current ethical frameworks are based around the dominance of the biomedical paradigm, involving an increased surveillance (and distrust) of ‘experts’ such as research scientists (Boulton and Parker, 2007; Burgess, 2007).

The concept of informed consent by participants and their voluntary participation is an essential part of any research project. Boulton and Parker discuss the three commonly agreed criteria of valid consent that underpin contemporary ethical research guidelines: (1) potential participants should be provided with all relevant information that might inform their decision to take part in the study; (2) their decision should be voluntary; and (3) they should be competent to make such a decision. Whilst this set of criteria might be appropriate to the field of biomedical research (although this remains the subject of considerable debate), many social science researchers advocate a more flexible, open-ended and negotiated approach (Boulton and Parker, 2007; Burgess, 2007).

In the social science literature, informed consent is more likely to be viewed as a process that is negotiated throughout the course of a project, rather than as a discrete event preceding the involvement of participants (eg. Mattingly, 2005; Reissman, 2005). Some researchers have proposed alternative ethical frameworks based on what have been termed 'virtue ethics' or 'narrative ethics' (Mattingly, 2005), or 'ethics of care' within feminist research (eg. Edwards and Mauthner, 2002). Others have given equal weight to the 'lay theories' of potential participants, rather than attempting to impose an 'expert' scientific model onto their reasons for taking part (or not) in a research project (eg. Stainton-Rogers, 1991). The latter approach recognises that participants may get involved in particular studies for different reasons to those of the researchers.

Within the terms of this debate, the current system of research ethics resting on the notion of ensuring informed consent and voluntary participation is not viewed as entirely appropriate for qualitative social science, and this is especially the case for ethnographic research (Griffin and Bengry-Howell, 2008; Miller and Boulton, 2007). What, then, are the

implications for research ethics and the negotiation of informed consent in projects of this kind? Michael Parker (2007) has advocated a more empirically informed bioethics which pays greater attention to meaning and culture. He also calls for more attention to the ethical dimensions of ethnographic research, challenging anthropologists to draw on the biomedical model of research ethics and especially the notion of informed consent. Parker draws on the anthropological concept of liminality to argue that ethnographic researchers are “standing on the threshold between two worlds” when they engage in research projects and ‘enter the field’ (2007, p.2254). Parker prefers to use the more radical concept of ‘duplexity’ here (following Pels, 1999). This refers to the ways in which ethnographers negotiate the ethics of research and knowledge production via their interactions with (potential) participants – including debates about what the research might become. This is a more transformatory approach to the ethical dilemmas outlined in this paper, but closer to our own experiences with the ‘Psyporeal’ Free Party sound system mentioned later in this paper.

Obtaining consent as a managed process

Negotiating access to participants in ethnographic research is sometimes viewed as a process to be carefully ‘managed’, particularly in the early stages where recruitment may rely on a study being perceived favourably by potential participants (Crang & Cook, 2007; Hobbs & May, 1993; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Researchers may attempt to manage impressions of their research and encourage participation, by being selective in the information that they disclose to participants (Homan, 1991, 1992). Similarly, they might present vague and misleading statements of ‘identity and purpose’ (Thorne, 1980: 287). In some cases researchers have deliberately misled potential participants and gatekeepers, if clearly stating their research goals could result in access being blocked

(Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994: 68). Researchers have also modified aspects of their appearance in an attempt to position themselves within the cultural context of potential participants and communicate appropriate messages about the research project (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Angrosino, 2007). Despite such efforts, researchers cannot prevent participants from categorising them and fashioning an identity for them in ways that they cannot control (Jorgenson, 1991).

Field relations are mostly established through a discursive process which involves differing degrees of 'rapport management' (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). An ability to 'do rapport' is one of the key skills of an ethnographic researcher. Feminist researchers have highlighted the function of 'doing rapport' as a persuasive tool for 'agenda setting' and 'managing consent' in field work settings, and have argued that there are many ethical issues, which are rarely addressed, associated with the concept and practice of rapport (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). If rapport is framed as a form of impression management, then it runs the risk of being viewed as a persuasive mechanism for eliciting consent. This could undermine any claim that participants' consent is truly informed or that their participation is entirely voluntary. It suggests that the recruitment process can be a duplicitous strategy for cajoling individuals to conform to a researcher's agenda by systematically assuaging any anxieties that they might express about being studied, which raises the spectre of 'methodological grooming'.

Obtaining consent as a form of 'methodological grooming'

In this paper we explore some of the ethical dilemmas involved in negotiating access to specific research sites in ethnographic research with young people aged 18 to 25. In particular we explore the notion of 'methodological grooming', in which researchers'

recruitment strategies can operate as forms of implicit persuasion, encouraging young people to take part in research projects despite their initial reluctance – or resistance. Such practices might emerge as a result of researchers striving to put research designs into practice, aiming to fulfil the promises outlined in research proposals. Achieving research aims can pose an increased challenge if hard-to-reach populations are involved, if potential participants are engaged in illegal or excessive practices, or if activities under study have been the focus of sustained surveillance, concern or disapproval by the police, government policy, academic research or in popular cultural representations. In order to explore these issues, we draw on our own experiences in three different research projects involving young people over the past 15 years: the ‘Car Modifiers’ study¹; the ‘Young People and Alcohol’ study²; and the ‘Music Festivals and Free Parties project’³.

In all three projects cited below, potential participants were initially reluctant to engage with the researcher, and evaded or resisted involvement in the research in different ways.

¹ The ‘car modifier’ study (2002) explored the cultural meaning of the motorcar for working class young men (aged 17-25) who modified and customised their vehicles, and associated with the underground British ‘cruising’ scene. Comprising Andrew Bengry-Howell’s PhD research, the study employed an ethnographic methodology, which combined participant observation of late-night gatherings of young men in modified cars on industrial estates in the West Midlands and Wales, with semi-structured interviews with young car modifiers.

² This project on ‘Branded consumption and social identification: Young people and alcohol’ was funded by the ESRC (RES-148-25-0021) as part of the programme on Identities and Social Action, based at the University of Bath. It was led by Christine Griffin, with Isabelle Szmigin, Chris Hackley and Wilm Mistral as Co-Investigators, and Andrew Bengry-Howell and David Clarke as the researchers. This study explored the relationship between consumption and identity for young adults aged 18 to 25, focusing on accounts of ‘everyday drinking’ by ‘ordinary’ consumers, via 16 informal focus group discussions with 89 young adults in three geographical locations.

³ This project on ‘Negotiating Managed consumption: Young people, branding and social identification processes’ was funded by an ESRC First Grants Award (RES-061-25-0129). Led by Andrew Bengry-Howell, with Yvette Morey as the RA and Christine Griffin, Isabelle Szmigin and Sarah Riley as mentors, the study explored young people’s (aged 18-25) negotiation of contemporary branded leisure spaces and ‘managed’ forms of consumption, through two case-studies of music-related leisure events: large-scale Music Festivals; informally organised Free Parties (illegal raves). The project combined an online ethnography of postings on a range of Web 2.0 platforms, on-site group discussions involving 98 participants; ethnographic observation of consumption practices, a ‘market mapping’ of leisure and consumption spaces using photographs, systematic field notes and found artefacts, and follow up individual interviews, focus groups and email interviews.

The researcher dealt with these varied situations and the associated ethical dilemmas using a variety of approaches, striving to avoid engaging in a methodological grooming process in order to obtain the consent of young people as research participants. In all cases, this led to more nuanced, flexible and negotiated recruitment practices involving conditional consent and bounded participation, informed by the perspectives of the researchers and potential participants.

The Car Modifiers study

This study involved an extended period of ethnographic non-participant observation and interviews with approximately 30 young men (aged 17 and 25) engaged in car modification projects (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2007). The fieldwork for this project was conducted during the summer of 2002 on car parks outside of McDonalds, Halfords and other commercial retail outlets situated in out-of-town retail parks and shopping centres in the West Midlands and North Wales, where modified car owners habitually gathered at night. 'Car modifiers' and 'cruisers' are notably conspicuous in terms of their highly stylised cars, loud in-car entertainment systems and penchant for high speed driving and performative displays. However, when it comes to engaging them in a research project, they can prove somewhat more elusive. ABH's initial attempts at establishing field relations with young male car modifiers were largely unsuccessful, and although some professed interest in his research when he introduced it to them, none would consent to participate in research interviews or a sustained research encounter.

ABH then produced a recruitment flyer drawing on the advice of a relative who was familiar with the cruising scene, using terms like 'car modder' to refer to individuals who modified cars, 'modding' to refer to the car modification process, and 'car mods' to refer to

specific modifications. He also avoided stating that he was a university student who wanted to talk to *men* about their cars, as his informant suggested that this might scare people off, and instead presented the study more generally as a project on modified cars.

Within days of circulating the recruitment flyer, a young man called 'Jonno' telephoned him and invited him to meet up outside a local branch of Halfords where he and his friends regularly gathered. However, when ABH visited this location and introduced himself to the small group of modified car owners that were gathered there, he encountered a fairly hostile reception, particularly when he asked for Jonno by name.

Kenny: [Turning to me] So what the fuck yer doin ere?...

Mark: Don't take any pictures of his fucking car...

Kenny: So who are you doing this project for (1) are you from the council or something?

As ABH attempted to manage the encounter and legitimise his presence among the group, his status as an unwelcome outsider was cemented when one of the group interrupted him asking if "that old knackered Renault parked in the car park round the corner" was his and it became immediately apparent that he did not even possess a modified car. Uncertain how to justify his feeble attempt at concealing a car, ABH was relieved when Jonno stepped forward, but was taken aback when Jonno followed introduction with an invitation to go for a ride in his car. In that moment, Jonno circumvented the ethical framework that ABH had envisaged and inverted the terms of the research encounter, which ABH had naively believed *he* was initiating. Moreover, Jonno appeared to be challenging ABH to *prove* his commitment to a exploratory research process which could provide a deep understanding of the young car modifier's world. After some deliberation, and aware that his credibility within this context would

likely rest on his decision, ABH thanked Jonno for the offer, and somewhat apprehensively climbed into the passenger seat of his car.

Jonno started his Honda Civic and slowly drove it across the car park and carefully eased its lowered suspension over a series of raised speed ramps. Leaving the Retail Park, he drove towards a roundabout that provided direct access onto the motorway. Jonno indicated and turned onto the motorway slip road, accelerated rapidly, and without any obvious signs of slowing, indicated right and cut straight between two cars, across the middle lane and into the 'fast lane' where he accelerated even further. As the car overtook everything that was driving in the two lanes that were adjacent to it, Jonno proudly announced that they had just hit 120 miles an hour. Within seconds the car had reached the next motorway junction, whereupon Jonno circled the roundabout and turned back onto the motorway heading in the opposite direction. Once again Jonno cut straight into the 'fast' lane and raced towards the junction where we had originally joined the motorway. As he rejoined the slip road and hurtled towards the approaching bend with no signs of deceleration, the car tilted over to one side and a loud knocking noise came from somewhere behind the passenger seat.

Although ABH survived this incident, he reflected on his decision to accept Jonno's invitation to have a ride in his car and questioned his willingness to put his life at risk in pursuance of research goals. In a context where he had previously encountered difficulties in obtaining research participants, his decision to accept Jonno's served as a turning point, and those he hoped to recruit were far more forthcoming from that point forward. His actions also opened a space for participants to shape the research encounter.

The Young People and Alcohol Study

The Young People and Alcohol study was conducted between 2005 and 2008 and focused on the drinking practices of young adults in the 18-25 age range. This demographic has been heavily scrutinised since the mid 1990s and was specifically targeted in the British Labour Government's National Alcohol Strategy (Cabinet Office, 2004, 2007). Young drinkers are the focus of anxiety and concern more generally (Griffin et al., 2009) and are constituted as a problematic group of consumers, commonly referred to as 'binge drinkers' in media and policy discourse (Measham, 2006). Since this term is defined in a variety of ways in policy documents and within the research literature on young people's alcohol consumption, it is commonplace to use alternative terms such as the 'culture of intoxication' or 'extreme drinking' to refer to the aspect of young people's drinking practices (Griffin et al., 2009; Measham 2006). The study set out to investigate the meanings and practices that young people associate with alcohol consumption and drinking to the point of intoxication. It employed a mixed methodology combining focus groups, individual interviews and ethnographic observation conducted within bars and clubs, which are central to night-time economies that have been driving urban renewal strategies in cities across the UK since the 1990s (Chatterton & Holland, 2003).

The study was undertaken in two geographical locations: 'Rowchester', a major metropolitan area in the English Midlands, and two towns in semi-rural locations in the English West Country. The participants were mostly full-time students from middle class backgrounds, but also included some young people from working class backgrounds who attended FE colleges on a day-release basis. Participants in the interview stage of the study were recruited through contacts that were established with local colleges and

interviewed in the context of existing friendship groups. In total 84 young people (52 females, 32 males) participated in the study; most self-identified their ethnic origin as White British, eight identified themselves as British Asian and three defined themselves as Black.

The first author was one of two male researchers who worked on the study and conducted the focus group and individual interviews, but worked alone during the stage of the study involving ethnographic fieldwork. In the second 'ethnographic' stage of the study focus group participants were invited to consent individually to an additional research encounter in which two researchers (one male, one female) accompanied them on an evening out with their friends. Each participant was offered a £10 gift voucher as an incentive to participate and to compensate them for their time to some degree. This more in-depth ethnographic research encounter extended the level of research involvement participants had been asked to consent to prior to the focus group interviews, and, thus, required a renegotiation of the terms of consent (Miller & Bell, 2002).

When introducing the prospective fieldwork to potential participants, ABH acknowledged that the proposed research encounter might appear unusual and potentially risky. He attempted to clarify its purpose and the intentions of the researchers, by assuring participants that his primary intention was not to specifically observe *their* behaviour, but rather the social contexts in which they drank, the branded drinks they consumed and specific practices related to the consumption of particular alcoholic drinks. He also clarified from the outset that he was seeking their consent for a research encounter that would be bounded and only take up a couple of hours of their evening, before leaving them to socialise with their friends as they would do ordinarily.

When this ethnographic fieldwork phase was introduced to potential participants during focus group discussions, despite a few askance glances, at least one participant appeared to seriously consider the proposal. Female participants were more hesitant than males, but the researcher soon generated a list of mobile phone numbers for potential participants. However, almost all of these people withdrew their interest when contacted again, and repeatedly deflected attempts to recruit them. The £10 gift vouchers which had been received favourably within the focus group setting, provided little incentive when they were offered in relation to an ethnographic encounter.

One young man ('Brian'), however, greeted the researcher's follow-up call with apparent enthusiasm, although he was reluctant to make specific arrangements. Over the following month the researcher repeatedly telephoned Brian and left answer phone messages, but his calls were never returned. When ABH actually made contact with Brian, he claimed to still be interested in the project, and invited the researcher to join him and his friends for a drink the following Friday evening. But when ABH telephoned to finalise arrangements, Brian did not answer the call, and the long awaited research encounter did not materialise. Brian's elusiveness may have been a tactical means of protecting his 'nights out on the piss' from external scrutiny and possible censure, or this may indicate that, like many young people who are invited to participate in research, our study was pretty low on his priority list (Williamson, 1997). ABH then approached another young man as a potential research participant.

'Marko', a young man from Seatown, had expressed interest in the fieldwork during a focus group, but had provided a mobile phone number with ten digits, rather than the

standard eleven. Whilst Marko might have deliberately given a wrong number to avoid being contacted, the researcher acknowledged he might have made a genuine mistake and could still be interested in the fieldwork. During the focus group discussion Marko stated that he played guitar in a local band, which was becoming popular and receiving a high number of 'hits' on its Myspace⁴ page. The researcher found and accessed the band's page, and sent Marko a message, in which he apologised for using his Myspace account to contact him, explained the problem with the mobile phone number and enquired whether Marko was still interested in participating in the fieldwork. Two weeks later the researcher had not received a reply, so he attempted to revisit the band's Myspace page and was dismayed to find that he was unable to access it, because the band's profile had been deleted.

While there is no evidence that Marko had deleted his band's profile to avoid participating in the Young People and Alcohol study, this interpretation was difficult to ignore. The researcher's attempts to solicit the involvement of potential research participants was starting to feel like an unethical form of methodological grooming. His professional role as a researcher investigating young people's drinking practices depended on establishing field relations that enabled him to access information relevant to this topic (Kvale, 1992). As an early career researcher, it was necessary to persevere and demonstrate that he possessed the required skills and expertise to negotiate access to research participants. On the other hand, as someone who viewed themselves as an ethical researcher, he recognised that potential participants had the right to withhold their consent (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002).

⁴ Myspace is a social networking website with a music emphasis which was launched in 2003.

Attempting to be as overt as possible in all future dealings with potential participants, ABH addressed the 'problem' of obtaining access through more open negotiation. This more flexible approach meant that the parameters of the ethnographic fieldwork could be negotiated and fashioned in a form that was acceptable to participants. During one focus group discussion at a nursing college in Rowchester, a young woman called 'Rose', suggested, half jokingly, that the researcher should 'come along' one night with her and her mates, to see 'what it was really like'. Although Rose's 'invitation' was framed as hypothetical, the researcher utilised this opportunity to introduce the ethnographic stage of the project and was delighted when Rose agreed to take part.

It was agreed that Rose would finalise the arrangements, but she suggested that the researcher might like to join her and a group of friends on a night out at the end of the month. Once again, ABH attempted to contact this potential fieldwork participant on several occasions by text and answer phone message over the next week without success. On the Monday morning following the weekend that Rose had identified, ABH received a text from her, in which she apologised for not responding to earlier messages, and informed him that she would have to withdraw from the project. Rose explained that she had left her mobile phone at her boyfriend's house, and he had read the researcher's texts and 'got the wrong idea'; misinterpreting the researcher's informal tone as evidence that she was cheating on him and planning to meet someone for a drink behind his back. She and her boyfriend had argued over her contact with ABH and as a result she no longer felt able to participate in the study. This incident reframed the proposed research encounter that ABH was trying to initiate in terms of a potential 'date', and provided an uncomfortable illustration of the impact that a researcher's attempts to successfully recruit

and engage potential research participants can have on their lives, irrespective of the best intentions of the researcher.

Conditional access and bounded consent

In subsequent negotiations with potential participants, the researcher persisted, and eventually obtained access into the field through two female focus group participants from Seatown. From the outset 'Helen' and 'Sara' expressed reservations about the research and the role they were asked to play in facilitating it, arguing that ABH's field notes could portray young drinkers like themselves in negative terms. They acknowledged that they tended to 'get a bit pissed' when they went out with their mates, and recognised that documenting this was significant in a context where young people's drinking practices were being more broadly criticised.

After much discussion with Helen and Sara about how our research team might consider young people's drinking practices without contributing to the current moral panic about 'binge drinking', they agreed to participate in the fieldwork, but on the understanding that their consent was bounded by certain conditions. They only consented to take part in the project if the researcher *promised* not 'to say anything nasty' about them or portray them in a manner that made young people 'look bad'. Helen was very aware of the potential implications of our research and the risk that our data could be 'used' to reinforce a negative impression of young people who, from her perspective, 'only want to go out and get pissed with their friends' and generally 'don't cause any trouble'.

As they negotiated the terms of an informal contract, Helen reiterated the importance of the 'promise' that she required the researcher to make, and insisted that he assure her

that he would not under any circumstances 'betray her trust'. The fact that Helen was acting as an equal and empowered participant who felt able to define and impose research parameters, made the interaction feel more ethical and less like a 'grooming' process in which the researcher was managing the process of obtaining consent in order to meet *his* research agenda.

Helen was not convinced that the 'ethical guidelines' cited by the researcher precluded him and his colleagues from saying anything 'nasty' about her and her friends, or from making them 'look bad'. However, she was prepared to 'give it a go' because she thought that he 'seemed quite nice'. Although Helen was operating according to a different and more personal system of ethics that transcended conventional notions of ethical research practice, she established a level of mutual trust and understanding with the researcher that enabled her to give informed, albeit bounded, consent to participate in the ethnographic fieldwork. As promised, Helen contacted the researcher two days later to arrange for him and a placement student to accompany her and her friends the following weekend on a night out in Seatown, and, at that point, he finally obtained access into the field.

From access to participation: Music Festivals and Free Parties project

This project was conducted between 2007 and 2010, and involved studies of the branding, marketing and consumption practices at two forms of music-related leisure events (commercial Music Festivals and unlicensed Free Parties); the ways in which young people negotiated the differently managed forms of consumption at each event; and the meanings that associated with their consumption practices. This section draws on

the study of Free Parties, examining the process of negotiation that led to the involvement of members of the 'Psyporeal' sound system in the project.

Initial contact with the sound system was made through a Facebook profile set up by the researcher on the project (Yvette Morey), as a means of promoting the project and accessing online Free Party networks. The Psyporeal sound system was identified through the online Friends network of another sound system, which the researchers were able to access when they accepted an invitation to be added as a 'Friend' of the project. Members of Psyporeal appeared extremely interested in the project and enthusiastically contributed to online discussions about Free Parties and the research that was being conducted, but flatly refused to participate in an off-line face-to-face interview when they were invited to, claiming they had absolutely nothing to gain from such an encounter. Their resistance, in this case, was overt and limited to an interview encounter; they stated they had no reservations about sharing the 'magic party number'⁵ with us, or to us attending one of their parties. ABH was keen to interview this group because of the anti-commercial values they expressed on their Facebook page, and the values they associated with the Free Party scene more broadly.

ABH contacted them directly via the Facebook message service, drawing on his own experiences of attending British free festivals and living as a 'new age traveller' during the early 1990s. He attempted to position himself as an 'insider' who understood their concerns and had an investment in documenting their culture from their perspective. This initiated an on-going process of negotiation, in which ABH had the cultural capital to 'persuade' them. During this interaction he presented himself as a person he 'used to be',

⁵ Telephone number, where a recorded message outlining directions to the party location could be accessed after midnight

rather than the person he might claim to 'be' now. Information was not concealed or fabricated, and the research was framed as aiming to document an important subculture that was often overlooked or represented unfairly. Both researchers presented themselves as 'knowing the score' regarding illegal activity and wanting to document the scene respectfully.

Attempting to manage, and in some cases challenge, the concerns of the Psyporeal sound system played an important role in establishing trust and communication, and a two-way relationship, which gave them a greater influence in how the research was conducted, and how the findings from the project were represented. This process facilitated their involvement in the organisation and running of a dissemination event, which was held as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science week (2010). Sound system members actively contributed to the process of deciding how research findings were represented, and included their own representations of the Free Party scene and espousals of its values, providing the soundtrack that accompanied the event.

Final reflections

Negotiating access to a particular setting and establishing field relations is a fundamental stage of any successful ethnographic research project, but, as the examples discussed here illustrate, it can become problematic when potential participants are young people and they actively evade or resist attempts to recruit them. Most social science research has to be conducted within a specific time-frame, in which the period allocated for recruitment and data collection is limited. When recruitment difficulties are encountered, this can create a tension between the requirement to generate research data, and an ethical requirement to protect the rights, interests and sensitivities of research participants

(British Sociological Association, 2002) and rights related to privacy and self determination (British Psychological Association, 2009).

Whilst it is necessary to manage the research process to some degree in order to meet research objectives and work within specific timetables, strategies to encourage participation, when a target group of young people expresses disinterest or an unwillingness to participate in a research project, could slide into an unethical process of 'methodological grooming'. Once official ethical approval has been obtained for research, there are few mechanisms that can be used effectively to regulate the practices of researchers once they are in the field, and ethics becomes a highly contingent, dynamic, temporal, occasioned and situated affair (Calvey, 2008). The process of negotiating consent with participants in field work settings, although ostensibly informed by professional codes of practice enshrined in ethical research guidelines, is in practice shaped by the values and principles that a researcher holds, and the everyday decisions and judgements they make in the field (Miller & Bell, 2002).

The examples from the three research projects discussed above highlight the importance of establishing a credible view of oneself and one's research in the process of negotiating access to field work settings. It also demonstrates the need to establish a level of mutual trust and understanding with potential research participants, or gatekeepers to a particular setting that one wishes to study. However, the three cases that have been considered here also raise ethical questions about strategic practices that researchers might employ to encourage and persuade participants to take part in ethnographic field-based research, particularly in contexts where potential research subjects are young people from 'hard-to-reach' groups who are the focus of moral panic, anxiety or disapproval. They also raise

questions about how potential participants might demonstrate their reluctance to get involved in such projects, through practices such as evasion, challenge or refusal, and how researchers might engage productively with the concerns of potential participants without resorting to a systematic process of 'methodological grooming' More broadly, they question the utility of traditional research ethics based solely around the principle of informed consent in field-based settings, and highlight the need for an alternative ethics built around respect, flexibility, reciprocity, negotiated consent and finding common ground between researchers and potential participants.

Following Burgess (2007), we argue that the traditional notion of informed consent may need to be replaced in social science as the default basis of ethical research practice, in favour of a negotiated contract. This could be considered on a case-by-case basis, with alternative notions of research ethics used in support of or replacing the notion of informed consent as appropriate. The foundational concepts in any alternative system of research ethics should enshrine respect for participants and flexibility as the basis for the negotiation of conditional access and bounded consent as appropriate.

Harrison, MacGibbon and Morton (2001) have argued for more reciprocal relations between researchers and research participants and greater negotiation regarding their mutual obligations. 'Actions of reciprocity' they suggest can play an important role in establishing a researcher's trustworthiness within the field, but can also be used as an instrumental means of advancing a researcher's agenda and managing the process of obtaining consent. Reciprocity, they argue, should empower research participants during the research process, but should also increase the benefit of research to the groups that are under study, by honouring a commitment to their interests. A wide body of literature

has argued that participation in research should not just be an 'add on' to the research process, but should play an integral part in it and have the capacity to shape and change how a project is undertaken (Bourke, 2010).

Ethical field relations in youth research need to be underpinned by an acknowledgement that researchers and participants both have a stake in the research process and negotiating an informal contract that defines and binds the terms of consent, and the conditions under which access is granted and may be withdrawn. If the terms of this contract can not be agreed and participants' concerns are taken seriously, then a researcher may concede that their research aims are untenable and choose not to involve certain groups, rather than attempting to manage their impressions of a study and persuade them their concerns are unfounded, through a systematic process of methodological grooming.

An ethical recruitment process is one in which both parties are able to negotiate the risks they are prepared to take and the extent to which they are prepared to compromise. Reciprocal research relations require research participants to be informed and provide consent in a context where a researcher takes ethical steps to avoid or limit harm. Reciprocity also requires researchers to offer *their* consent to potential research participants, that they will adhere to any conditions of access that might be imposed. The notion of consent as a two-way process in which the research agenda and the terms of the research encounter are negotiated and field-relations are co-constructed, ensures that negotiating access to youth research settings does not become a process of methodological grooming. In providing a space for potential participants to voice their concerns, have their concerns taken seriously, and shape how the research process

develops, it provides opportunities for a rich and mutually beneficial encounter, which both parties openly consent to, and neither is coerced or persuaded.

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